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Foundations of College Writing - Dr. Sherry

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Choice Influences

Problem

After spending a majority of one's life in grade school, it seems only natural that the next step for one to take in life is for higher education. Among my group of friends and a majority of the people I knew in high school, most of us did not begin to think about what college they wanted to go to until half of their senior year had passed by. And for those who had a couple schools in mind to apply to, some were unsure of what major to pursue in. Due to the minute amount of time that most college applicants spend choosing and applying to colleges, I wonder what influences someone during that time period to make that important choice of choosing their major. Is it what they excel at in grade school, what their parents do, or do they pick something that they think will help them in the next step in their life, starting a career after they graduate from college? And when they pick their majors, are they happy in those majors, or do they end up switching at some point over the course of their college career? In this paper, I first provide background from three other studies of choice of college major and happiness in that field:

Dietrich, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, and Kracke's (2013) *Deciding on a College Major: Commitment Trajectories, Career Exploration, and Academic Well-Being*, and Moakler and Kim's (2014) *College Major Choice in STEM: Revisiting Confidence and Demographic Factors*. Then, I address this question using data I have collected from interviewing students attending Bloomsburg University about their majors. Finally, I draw some conclusions about what

influences a student to choose their college major, and compare my data to Soria and Stebleton's (2013) *Major Decisions: Motivations for Selecting a Major, Satisfaction, and Belonging*.

Background

Several studies have been done to examine what influences a student to choose their major. Martin Moakler and Mikyong Kim, as well as Julia Dietrich, Anna Lichtwarck-Aschoff, and Barbel Kracke are two sets of researchers who are attempting to answer this question with data they have collected in the past few years (Dietrich, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, and Kracke, 2013; and Moakler and Kim, 2014). Dietrich, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, and Kracke made observations of when a future student decides on a major and their level of commitment to that major¹. "... our studies show that while the majority of adolescents had already committed themselves to one major in the last phase of the decision process (decided trajectory), there was a considerable amount of adolescents who showed a late crystallization process towards one option (narrowing trajectory), and who had weak and changing commitments (searching trajectory)" (Dietrich, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, and Kracke, 2013, p. 314)². This implies that not every college applicant has one sole choice of what they want to major in and may not make a decision until right before they begin applying to colleges. Due to such a short time period, an applicant may feel pressured to declare a major and end up choosing one that they might not enjoy later on³.

A study by Moakler and Kim about students choosing STEM majors also offers some insight on what could influence a student to choose their major. "Parents working in STEM areas may naturally provide mentoring experiences, remove fears about STEM careers, and share

¹ INtroduce

² INsert

³ INterpret

the excitement of scientific discovery and engineering, thereby stimulating STEM study and career interests” (Moakler and Kim, 2014, p. 140). It is possible this type of influence could also apply for students whose parents are not involved in the STEM field. A student who is unsure about what field to pursue in might look to their parents as to what field they should immerse themselves in. The parent in this case could suggest the field they are in already, due to the abundance of knowledge they have in that area.

Another point that Moakler and Kim make towards answering this question is that they mention that it is possible for a student to stick to what they already know when they move on to college, “Findings suggest that students’ confidence level in their academic and mathematics abilities makes a significant difference in their initial STEM major choice” (Moakler and Kim, 2014, pg. 128). It is reasonable to believe that someone would choose to major in a subject in college that they excelled at in grade school.

Method

To answer these questions, I interviewed seventeen students enrolled at Bloomsburg University in the span of a week about their majors and minors. I made sure that the interviewees varied greatly, finding students of different gender, year, undeclared and declared, satisfactory or unsatisfactory with their major, and with and without minors. Some of the nine questions were inspired by the articles by Dietrich, Lichtwark-Aschoff, and Kracke (2013) and Moakler and Kim (2014), concerning the commitment of a student to their major, influence by parents to pursue a major similar to their occupation, and if their major was something they excelled at previously in grade school. With the data I collect, I will then compare to look for trends and

draw conclusions about to find an answer, and compare my answer to that of another recent study by Krista Soria and Michael Stebleton (2014).

Findings

When students were asked if they were happy in their majors and minors, fifteen of the seventeen students reported that they were happy, and five of the seven students who had declared minors said they were happy with the minor. The two students who were unhappy with their majors stated that they were dissatisfied because after taking classes on the subject, they found it was no longer something they wanted to pursue.

Prompted with the question of why each one chose their major, ten of the seventeen students said that they enjoyed the field. Other students had more unique answers⁴. Student 2, an American Sign Language/English Interpreting major, decided they wanted to be an interpreter after going on a vacation with their deaf cousin. Students 7 and 14, both Education majors, wanted to make a difference in the lives of children. Student 6, a Music Education major, had received positive feedback from their voice performances, and their teachers in high school encouraged them to continue to strengthen their skills⁵. This data suggests that in this sample of students, a majority of students choose their major because of positive feelings associated with the field⁶. On the subject of their minors, five of the seven chose it because they were very interested in the field. One chose it because they thought it would help them get a job and another chose it because it was previously their minor. Student 1, an ASL/English Interpreting major and a Theatre minor, wishes to incorporate their minor into their major and interpret in a

⁴ INtroduce

⁵ INsert

⁶ INterpret

Broadway setting, similar to Student 9, an ASL/English Interpreting major and Criminal Justice minor, who wants to interpret in a legal setting.

A few other questions dealt with influences from outside sources. Thirteen students reported that their major could offer some level of job security once they graduated from college, but only four said that the security influenced their choice of major. When asked about positive or negative pressure from family and friends about their choice, eight students had received positive pressure from their decision, and mostly from their guardians. Seven students had no type of pressure applied to them over their choice, and Student 16, a Music Liberal Arts major, was advised against choosing that major but they did regardless. The data from this sample of students can be interpreted in a way that positive pressure (job security and support) can influence a student's choice.

Only two students said that their major was something similar to what their parents do for a living, and a few students mentioned that their major was not even close. Also, there was not one student who chose a major that they did not excel at in grade school, nine said they were very good at the topic and eight said that their school did not offer classes relative to their major.

When asked of their commitment levels of choosing their major when they were first applying to colleges, ten of the students said that they were set on one major. However, six students have changed their major at least once and four who have never changed majors wish to do so. The students who have changed their majors gave reasons such as their new major was a much better fit, they were able to get into the program that they initially wanted to be in, and the previous major had too many mass lecture courses. The students who want to change their major want to do so because they decided that their current major is no longer enjoyable for them, with the exclusion of Student 12, who is undeclared and will choose their desired major once their

GPA improves. This set of data is interesting because the same number of students who were not completely committed to a major when they first attended college is almost equal to the students who have already changed their major, these two groups do not contain the same students.

Conclusion

When interpreting the results of my study and drawing to a conclusion, it is important to remember that my data is a small sample of seventeen students out of the population of over nine thousand Bloomsburg University undergraduates. The data that stands out the most is that what tends to influence students the most when it comes to deciding their majors is the positive feelings surrounding it, whether it be their love for the field, the encouragement and support from their family and friends, something they excelled at in grade school, or their desire to make a difference. This data agrees with a study done by Soria and Stebleton about the satisfaction a student has with their major. “The data suggest that students who selected their majors because of intrinsic motivation (interest in subject area) were more likely to be satisfied with their university experiences” (Soria and Stebleton, 2013, p. 36).

Something that was not similar to the data that I had collected was from the study by Moakler and Kim, noting how students can be influenced by their parents, particularly in the STEM (Moakler and Kim, 2014, p. 140). While a majority of the students I interviewed said their major was not similar to what their parents do, the one STEM major I did interview noted that their major was not even close to what their parents’ occupations were.

The data of my study combined with the study by Soria and Stebleton suggests to me that students are influenced into choosing majors and want to stay in majors that positively affect them in some way. For the most part, how much a student enjoys their major is dependent on

whether they chose it because it was a subject they had great interest in, and if they end up not enjoying it or lose interest, they will probably want to switch majors to something more suitable to their interests.

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